

Definition of Terms Used in Describing the North Carolina Medical Examiner System

There is no standardized death investigation system in the United States. Different jurisdictions may use the same terms to refer to different positions. The following definitions are those used in North Carolina.

Medical Examiner (ME)

- A county-level position.
- When contacted about a death, the ME makes the decision as to whether the case falls under ME jurisdiction. If the case falls under ME jurisdiction, the ME:
 - Takes charge of the body
 - Makes inquiries regarding the cause and manner of death
 - Reduces the findings to writing
 - Files this report with the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME)
 - Completes a death certificate
- 3-year ME appointments are made by the Chief Medical Examiner. The Chief Medical Examiner shall give preference to physicians licensed to practice medicine (but usually not pathology or forensic pathology).
- All the forensic pathologists in NC are also MEs.
- The OCME may also appoint licensed physician assistants, nurse practitioners, nurses, coroners, or emergency medical technician-paramedics.
- The ME usually is not required to be a specialist in death investigation or pathology.

Coroner

- A county-level elected official whose duty is to make inquiry into deaths in certain categories.
- Because NC has a state-wide ME system, only a medical examiner, and not a coroner (unless that coroner is also an appointed ME) can legally certify a death.

Medicolegal Death Investigator (MDI)

- The role of the MDI is to investigate any death that falls under the jurisdiction of the medical examiner, including all suspicious, violent, unexplained and unexpected deaths.
- The MDI is responsible for the dead person, whereas the local law enforcement jurisdiction is responsible for the scene. The MDI performs scene investigations, emphasizing information developed from the decedent and determines the extent to which further investigation is necessary.
- There are no formal requirements to become a MDI. The MDI must be the most medically knowledgeable person at the scene of the crime to determine if further investigation is necessary.
- There are no formal educational requirements specifically for the MDI. Any degree program dealing with Forensic Science, Natural science, Anthropology, Nursing, or any other medically related field would be useful.
- There are several established training courses available throughout the country that teach the basic information needed in order to perform a thorough, competent medicolegal death investigation.
- The OCME has one MDI position in Raleigh.

Pathologist

- A physician trained in the medical specialty of pathology. Pathology is the branch of medicine that deals with the diagnosis of disease and causes of death by means of laboratory examination of body fluids (clinical pathology) cell samples, (cytology) and tissues (anatomic pathology).
- The autopsy is the procedure utilized to study the dead. It is primarily a systematic external and internal examination for the purposes of diagnosing disease and determining the presence or absence of injury.
- In North Carolina, there are some hospital-based pathologists who perform medicolegal autopsies with an agreement with the OCME.

Forensic Pathologist

- The forensic pathologist is a medical doctor subspecialist in pathology whose area of special competence is the examination of persons who die suddenly, unexpectedly or violently. The forensic pathologist is an expert in determining cause and manner of death.

- The forensic pathologist is specially trained to:
 - Perform autopsies to determine the presence or absence of disease, injury or poisoning
 - Evaluate historical and law-enforcement investigative information relating to manner of death
 - Collect medical evidence, such as trace evidence and secretions
 - Document sexual assault
 - Reconstruct how a person received injuries.
- Forensic pathologists are trained in multiple forensic sciences as well as traditional medicine. Other areas of science of which the forensic pathologist must have a working knowledge include toxicology, firearms examination (wound ballistics), trace evidence, anthropology, odontology, forensic serology and DNA technology.
- The forensic pathologist acts as the case coordinator for the medical and forensic scientific assessment of a given death, making sure that the appropriate procedures and evidence collection techniques are applied to the body.
- When forensic pathologists are employed as death investigators they bring their expertise to bear upon the interpretation of the scene of death, in the assessment of the time of death, of the consistency of witnesses' statements with injuries, and the interpretation of injury patterns or patterned injuries.
- In jurisdictions where there are medical examiner systems, forensic pathologists are usually employed to perform autopsies to determine cause and manner of death.
- In North Carolina, board-certified forensic pathologists are employed in one of four regional centers to perform medicolegal autopsies for the many counties in their respective regions. They may be called **Regional Pathologists**.

Regional Center

- This is the physical location where medicolegal autopsies are performed by board-certified forensic pathologists.
- Currently, in North Carolina there are four (4) Regional Centers: OCME in Raleigh; Mecklenburg County; Wake Forest University (WFU) Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem; and East Carolina University (ECU) Brody School of Medical in Greenville.